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DEPT FOR AF/EX AND AF/E

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TAGS: [PINR](#) [ER](#)

SUBJECT: BIO NOTES ON ERITREAN PRESIDENT ISAIAS AFWERKI

REF: ASMARA 345 "IS ISAIAS UNHINGED?"

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Isaias is an austere and narcissistic dictator whose political ballast derives from Maoist ideology fine-tuned during Eritrea's 30-year war for independence. He is paranoid and believes Ethiopian PM Meles tried to kill him and that the United States will attempt to assassinate him. He is not notably nepotistic and has not favored his ancestral village or immediate family. This message includes some biographic tidbits offered as an addendum to USG bio information on foreign government leaders. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Aiming for 112: Isaias, 62, told a visiting German parliamentarian in late 2008 that he is healthy and expects to live another 40 or 50 years. He said he hopes to serve his country as long as he is able. In a May 2008 television interview, Isaias said Eritrea might hold elections "in three or four decades."

¶3. (S/NF) An Alleged Ethiopian Assassination Attempt: Isaias and Meles, brothers in arms during the 1980s, are now blood enemies. Why? In 1996, while returning from a vacation in Kenya, Isaias, his family, and his inner entourage stopped in Addis, where Meles offered to fly them back to Asmara in one of his aircraft. Isaias accepted the offer; en route the aircraft caught fire, but managed to turn back and land safely in Addis. According to someone who was on the aircraft, an infuriated Isaias accuse Meles to his face of trying to kill him and his family. Isaias has not trusted Meles since, according to this source.

¶4. (S) Fears of an American Assassination Attempt: Isaias thinks the United States will attempt to kill him by missile strike on his residence in the city of Massawa, according to late 2007 information from the Force Commander of UNMEE.

¶5. (C) Holier Than Thou: Isaias has berated the Chinese ambassador in Asmara for China's embrace of market capitalism. Isaias was sent to China by the Eritrean Liberation Front for political commissar training in the 1960s, where, according to the Chinese ambassador, "he learned all the wrong things." Isaias was turned off by the cult of personality surrounding Mao, but apparently internalized Maoist ideology.

¶6. (C) Fluent in Arabic: Asmara-based Arab ambassadors are impressed by Isaias' fluency in Arabic. There is some debate

about where he learned it, but all agree he is a comfortable and capable Arabic speaker.

¶17. (C) Talented Speechwriter: In mid-2008, after Isaias delivered an impressive address in English to a gathering of ministerial-level representatives on the subject of Darfur, Yemane Ghebremeskel, the director of the office of the president, said Isaias had written the speech himself.

¶18. (C) Hot Temper: At a January 2008 dinner he hosted for a codel and embassy officials, Isaias became involved in a heated discussion with his Amcit legal advisor about some tomato seedlings the legal advisor provided to Isaias' wife. Isaias complained that despite tender care by his wife, the plants produced only tiny tomatoes. When the legal advisor explained that they were cherry tomatoes and were supposed to be small, Isaias lost his temper and stormed out of the venue, much to the surprise of everyone, including his security detail.

¶19. (C) Holds a Grudge: A senior party official said Isaias and Djibouti President Guelleh had (g)eed during a 'u'e 2008 telephone conversation to try to resolve at the presidential level issues related to the June border clash. According this senior Eritrean official, Isaias was livid when Guelleh supposedly shortly thereafter lambasted Eritrean aggression in a media interview. Isaias reportedly felt personally betrayed by President Guelleh, and has been obstinate about resolving the Djibouti-Eritrea border dispute ever since.

¶110. (C) Thin Skinned: Isaias asked to be named the patron of the World Bank-funded Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project (CARP). When individuals involved with CARP published the book "Asmara: Africa's Secret Modernist City," it failed to include a note of thanks to CARP's patron. Isaias was miffed and shut down CARP.

¶111. (C) Good Op-Sec: Isaias has an aversion to talking on the telephone and frequently sleeps in different locations to foil a coup or assassination attempt. During the winter months he spends most of his time in Massawa rather than in Asmara. When dining in restaurants, Isaias will often switch plates with a subordinate, apparently to avoid being poisoned, according to the Qatari ambassador.

¶112. (C) The Early Years of Little Beer Pot: Isaias' father, Afwerki, comes from the village of Tselot, which is perched on the lip of a 7,000' escarpment four miles southeast of Asmara. When Isaias was a boy Afwerki reportedly spent much of his time in Tigray, where he owned a coffee farm that was later nationalized by the Derg. With Afwerki largely absent, Isaias lived with his mother (rumored to have family roots in Tigray) in a working class neighborhood in eastern Asmara near the train depot and the Lutheran church. Isaias' mother made and sold a traditional beer called sewa. By some accounts, Isaias was nicknamed the Tigrinya equivalent of "Beer Pot," after the ceramic jug from which sewa is dispensed. Q Qoday he is a QeQvy whisky drinker, but perhaps as a youth his nickname referred as much to his habits as to his mother's business.

¶113. (C) No Pork for His Ancestral Village: In November 2008 emboffs visited Tselot and saw no indication that the village has received any special favor from Isaias. Like most Eritrean villages, it has electricity but no running water or sewer system. Gaunt cattle and untended donkeys roam the village. Their droppings are quickly gathered and formed into oval patties, which are then stuck on rock walls, dried, and used as fuel for cooking. Afwerki is said to be buried in the village cemetery, but emboffs could not locate his grave. Isaias' immediate family is rarely featured in the state-run media and keeps a low profile. Although his portrait adorns many shops in Asmara, there is no cult of personality in Eritrea. Isaias often appears in the media clad casually in slacks, jacket, open-necked shirt, and sandals or loafers. He rarely travels in a motorcade.

¶114. (C) Hard-hearted: When a visiting U.S. movie star in

early 2008 raised the plight of two Embassy Asmara FSNs who have been imprisoned without charge since 2001, Isaias glared stonily at her and replied, "Would you like me to hold a trial and then hang them?"

MCMULLEN